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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/28/2016

TAGS: MARR MASS PARM PREL VE BE

SUBJECT: DELIVERY OF DEMARCHE ON VENEZUELA'S ARMS ACQUISITION PROGRAM TO BELGIUM

REF: STATE 155336

Classified By: PolCounselor Theodore H. Andrews; Reason: 1.4 (d).

1.(C) On Sept. 27, Poloff delivered to Christiaan Van Driessche, head of Belgium Foreign Ministry's (MFA) Latin American section, the points in reftel concerning Venezuela's growing arms acquisition program. Van Driessche responded that, while Belgium shared U.S. concerns and its federal government monitored arms transfers out of the country, it was "handcuffed" in dealing with the matter of arms transfers. The authority for issuing arms transfer licenses had devolved to the Belgium's regional Flemish, Walloon and Brussels governments a couple of years ago, after an unapproved sale of firearms to Nepal's military caused a public uproar. The new system was intended to have closer oversight but, Van Driessche commented, was regrettable in allowing secret arms sales that the central government would otherwise not approve. He voiced interest in learning whatever information the Embassy might get about Belgian firms making deals with Venezuela.

¶2. (C) Poloff reported to Van Driessche that the Embassy had earlier in the week hosted a lunch with representatives of the three regional governments and the MFA arms control section to discuss U.S. concerns on arms transfer issues, including Venezuela. Van Driessche suggested that it might be useful to be sure that the export-promotion offices of the three regions also be aware of U.S. concerns. We agreed to do so as quickly as possible.

¶3. (C) Turning to Belgium's broader concerns regarding Venezuela, Van Driessche said that it considered Chavez' Venezuela a "real menace," that could have a negative effect on Mercosur nations. The threat was particularly worrisome with regard to the organization's successes - Chile, Brazil and Argentina. He hoped that the "good sense" of the Venezuelan people would prevail over Chavez' clearly extremist slogans, despite the man's remarkable charisma with the common people.

¶4. (C) Comment: It was clear from the questions put by Van Driessche and his colleague that they were eager to learn as much as possible about potentially-embarrassing arms transfers from Belgium. While Belgium manufacturers only small arms, it is still a potential source of weapons.

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